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Independence as a Principle of Voluntary Action

Developing a new story about who we are:
the challenge for voluntary action in Northern Ireland

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Background

The Building Change Trust was established by the Big Lottery Fund with a National Lottery grant of £10 million as an investment for community capacity building and promotion of the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

The Trust is accepted as a charity by HM Revenue and Customs (XT11390). The Trust's corporate Trustee; Building Change Trust Limited has 8 Directors drawn from different backgrounds across Northern Ireland and is registered as a company limited by guarantee in Northern Ireland (NI071182).

During the coming period , 2013 until 2018, our resources will be used to support the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland to achieve more and better collaboration, increased sustainability and to be a learning sector which identifies, shares and acts on the lessons from its own and others' work and influences others' actions.

Our work will be carried out across 6 thematic areas, Collaboration, Social Finance, Social Innovation, Inspiring Impact, Leadership and Creative space for civic thinking.

This opinion piece on the independence of the community and voluntary sector has been commissioned as the first piece of work under the latter theme and is offered as an opening contribution to a debate on the role and future of an independent community and voluntary sector in contemporary society.

This and the other opinion pieces to be commissioned in the future will each be accompanied by a public seminar and debate on their subject matter. We hope to enable a facility for online comments and contributions in due course but in the meantime if you have any comments on the content of this document please don't hesitate to contact us by e-mail at info@buildingchangetrust.org

Foreword and acknowledgements

This essay was written in response to a commission from the Building Change Trust. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Trust. Thanks are due to Bill Osborne and Nigel McKinney of the Building Change Trust for their patience and to the Trust's Board for the vision behind the commission. Thanks are also due to the interviewees who gave their time to be interviewed and to colleagues at the University for keeping me right when I might have gone wrong.

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Introduction


There is precious little discussion of what the sector is becoming, or what role it should play through and beyond the contemporary politics of austerity. Instead much of the third sector's conversation appears to be focused on questions of organisational survival and 'resilience', collaboration and merger, and what look like increasingly desperate attempts to demonstrate impact and value for money. Caught like a rabbit in headlights, there appears to be no sustained sector-wide debate about the potential transformations underway; about what they mean and how they can be shaped. In the relative silence on these issues, the terms of the debate are being set elsewhere (Macmillan, 2012).

A wide -ranging debate on the future of the voluntary and community sector in the current political and economic climate in the UK and internationally is underway, driven by profound changes to welfare states and the representation of interests in contemporary societies. Yet as Rob McMillan suggests in his blog, quoted above, there is much that is quite unsatisfactory about the focus of discussion. The understandable concentration on immediate problems of survival and directly related concerns risks missing the wider implications of the changes now underway that are profoundly reshaping the role of an independent civil society in contemporary democracies and the nature of the relationship between civil society and the state. In the place of an informed debate, there is either silence or a great deal of noise that is throwing little light on what is going on and what might be done.

Fears about the future of voluntary action as an independent force in society is underpinning much of such debate as there is, framing discussion around the nature and extent of any threat to a feature of the voluntary sector that, in the UK at least, has been taken for granted as one of its essential features. Whilst it remains the case that most charities remain local and very small, many receiving little or no government funding, nevertheless the colonisation of voluntary action by state determined public policy priorities delivered through market mechanisms dominates the discussion.

The wholesale remodeling of the welfare system in countries like the UK is starting to fragment the unity of the third sector as a single player in public policy, threatening to widen the divide between successful players in the welfare market and small-scale grassroots action. As some of the old certainties start to crumble, it is creating a real challenge for the development of a new story among voluntary agencies about who collectively they are and what they stand for. Analysis of the evidence suggests that the challenge is particularly acute in Northern Ireland, while the necessary debate is only just beginning.

This essay considers what is currently happening to voluntary action in Northern Ireland in the light of the broader context. It first discusses the concept of independence as it applies for voluntary and community organisations in contemporary democracies and why those seeking to defend it consider it a defining principle. Drawing on Canadian comparative research, it argues that remaining independent means retaining control over the story that sets out for voluntary agencies who, collectively, they are and what they stand for. It sets out a framework for understanding what might make this possible, even in unpromising times.



The essay then discusses the current challenges to the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland drawing on evidence from around the UK to illuminate the issues. This section draws on evidence from a recently completed study, commissioned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, by this author, Professor David Mullins of the Third Sector Research Centre at Birmingham University and Dr Jenny Muir of Queens University Belfast on housing partnerships and the 'Supporting People' programme. It also draws on five interviews conducted for the preparation of this essay with three regional strategic support organizations and two agencies in two of the main policy fields in which the sector has a significant role in service delivery. The project has been subject to the University of Ulster's ethical governance procedures, guaranteeing anonymity to the interviewees.


The importance of independence as a principle of voluntary action:

For some, independence should be a defining characteristic of voluntary action. Smerdon (2007, 2009), for example, drawing on an older tradition in writing about voluntary action in the UK context (Beveridge, 1948; Knight, 1993), argues that the ability to act independently, defined as the freedom to adopt values and deliver on those values as organisations see fit, is fundamental to the principle and practice of voluntary action and fundamental to the good society. Independence means, Smerdon argues both a relative freedom from constraint and the freedom to "think, experiment, to uphold values and to challenge".

These concerns reflect a long liberal tradition in political thought that sees association among citizens free from over-mighty regulation or interference from the state and free from market relations as a bedrock of democracy. From de Tocqueville's 19th century study, "Democracy in America", through Armond and Verba's invocation of civic culture in the early 1960s to the much more recent UK report of the Deakin Commission in 1996, the starting assumption has been that both the good society and effective democratic governance rest on these solid foundations. The Deakin Report took independence and its value as its starting point to argue for a renewal of the relationship between voluntary action and government on terms that recognised its independent importance for the public good. It argued that voluntary action was a badge of citizenship in a democracy and that its influence rested principally on "the values it is taken to exemplify" (Deakin and Kershaw, 1996: 15).

Independence operates at three interlocking and mutually reinforcing levels. First it means individual organisations retaining the ability to set their own objectives and manage their own affairs. This is the level of the individual firm, able to set its own objectives and methods of trading to meet those objectives and is a shared characteristic of both for profit and nonprofit organisations. But second, for value-based organisations independence in thought and action implies the ability to express those values in public through being able to exercise the freedom to combine with others to represent collective interests of citizens, particularly those who might otherwise be excluded, in political debate and decision. The democratic impact of independent voluntary action rests on this freedom. But beyond that and thirdly, independent voluntary action depends on the effective telling of a wider story about its role in society that goes beyond a narrow defence of sectional interests and that links independence of voice with the broader interests of society as a whole.

In the UK at least, this wider claim has been historically supported by the recognition in charity law of collective interest representation through campaigning in pursuit of charitable objectives. To a significant degree the identity of the voluntary or third sector in the UK, as a separate single sector in society rests on the defence of this link in the eyes of the public. Since 1993, and the very negative reaction to Barry Knight's suggestion that it would be better if the "sector" split in two between the service deliverers and



the rest, much energy has been expended by sectoral representative bodies in defending the unity of this sectoral identity.¹

Independence is thus a core condition for the free formation and management of individual organisations, for the representation of collectivities of interests and identities in public debate, and for the very notion of a single entity or 'sector' of voluntary associations.

Compacts as a means of state recognition of independence

The Deakin report was doubly significant. Its commissioning was prompted by concerns that the introduction of markets into health and welfare delivery and the importation of private sector management techniques to public management since the 1980s were changing the nature of the relationship between government and the sector in ways that it was felt made it necessary to restate the importance of independence as a principle. Secondly, it was the source of the idea that the independent voice of the sector could be preserved while it at the same time played an increasingly important role in public service delivery through the mechanism of the compact. Much copied around the world, from Estonia to Australia (Casey et al, 2010), compacts embodied the important idea that the identity of the sector contained both elements and that modern techniques of government required there to be a recognition of both.

The actual usefulness of compacts in practice was another matter entirely. As countries continued to restructure welfare regimes around market principles, few more so than in the UK and in England especially, no amount of airy platitudes could compensate for the brutal realities of a world where the survival and future health of voluntary organisations came to depend more and more on their ability to compete to provide public services under contract to a government agency. In England, attempts to beef up the compact by introducing new regulatory structures and feedback mechanisms failed to dispel a growing sense of disquiet about the future for an independent voluntary sector. This prompted the Baring Foundation to establish an initiative focused on independence in 2006, within its strengthening the voluntary sector grants programme. In 2009, its report, *The First Principles of Voluntary Action* was published. This included separate essays on each of the four nations in the UK and also, the USA, Canada and Germany.

¹ In England, for example a rather bad tempered spat has developed between those who argue that delivering public services under contract does not make charities dependent nor susceptible to mission drift (Bubb, 2012, cited in Teasdale et al, 2012) and the position taken by the National Coalition for Independent Action and others who warn of the wholesale takeover of voluntary action, once an independent force in society by corporately minded VSOs in cahoots with private companies like SERCO (Rochester and Zimmeck, 2012).

The ire of the critics was raised in particular by a letter sent to the First Secretary to the Treasury signed by 14 of the main infrastructure and service providing charities in England in October 2012 that stressed the willingness of the third sector to work with government in its reforms and stressing the important role that the sector could play. To the critics, this looked too much like a wilful abandonment of mission for the sake of organisational survival, a view supported by polemical articles in newspapers like the Guardian. In response, and writing in his official blog, the NCVO's head of policy, Karl Wilding argued that three quarters of all charities receive no money from the state and that there is no evidence that those that do have moderated their campaigning activities. The Chief Executive of the national infrastructure organisation in England, NAVCA, and a signatory of the notorious letter, argued that his organisation has to work with who-ever is in power to get support for its members and the local communities they serve.



Reviewing this evidence Smerdon, (2009) argues that the first and foremost pressure on independence had been the rise of performance-based contracts, forcing organisations to become “instruments of government policy” (ibid: 9). The existence of the compact in all of the UK’s four ‘nations’ had nowhere reduced the threat. In 2011, the Foundation established a Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector a five-year initiative, chaired by Nicholas Deakin. In its second report (Baring Foundation, 2012), the panel identified six threats to independence, as follows.

1. Loss of the sector’s distinctive identity.
2. Ineffective safeguards and regulation.
3. Threats to independent governance
4. Statutory funding and contracting arrangements.
5. Threats to independence of voice.
6. Lack of consultation and involvement

The report notes that the right of organisations to campaign and criticise government is coming under public attack, and self-censorship among organisations is becoming an increasing problem. Attacks on so-called “fake charities”, gagging clauses in some contracts, and a lack of consultation and involvement are identified as particular problems.

Most tellingly, writing in the context of England, the report notes that a central and underlying problem is a tendency for public agencies to move to an “any willing provider” contracting regime where voluntary agencies and private companies are treated as equivalents. This trend marks a clear change from the compacts era where, in rhetoric at least, government committed itself to set of principles that were based on some recognition of the view that the worth of the contribution of the voluntary sector to society was based on its values. The evidence from Northern Ireland, as we will see, suggests that we are at present on the cusp of this kind of change, reflected in the current instability in the funding environment.

Co-optation; instrumentalisation; and incorporation

Evidence from states committed to both debt and deficit reduction through reducing public expenditure, relying on monetary policy to foster economic growth shows a close association with a significant weakening of the ability of the third sector to express its values base publicly and act for collective interests (Laforest, 2013). The recasting of voluntary agencies as just another way of delivering public services and redefining citizens as consumers in a welfare market have been particularly undermining. Post recession, the UK is among those states most wedded to this response, just as it had become the centre of the global banking industry, whose collapse precipitated the crisis in the first place. We should expect to see relatively large effects.

Three soft processes are at work here in undermining the independence of voluntary agencies based on their values. Deena White (2012) identifies these as cooptation, instrumentalisation and incorporation. The first, she writes, refers to seduction through the apparent sharing of power. The second means harnessing a voluntary agency to objectives other than its own, for example, through targeted financing. The third is a virtual, benign, government takeover, as when a voluntary agency’s activities come to be wholly defined and financed as part of a public programme (White, 2012: 204).

- Co-optation becomes a threat when partnership structures where voluntary agencies have a seat at the table are ignored or bypassed.
- Instrumentalisation becomes a threat when voluntary agencies are seen wholly from the perspective of what they can do for government as in the shift from grant in aid to contracts.
- Incorporation occurs when the identity of voluntary agencies becomes submerged in the government programmes they are helping to deliver.


Deena White argues that these processes are only resisted in cases where voluntary agencies succeed in defending their ability to collectively define who they are in ways that force governments to deal with them on these self-defined terms. In the absence of other sources of power, voluntary agencies have to depend almost entirely on their capacity to mobilise others and channel their ideas so that they resonate with the wider public in so-called naming and framing strategies. Two conditions are needed for this to happen.

- First, voluntary organisations must collectively possess the independent organisational capacity to resist others' defining their status and role;
- Second, political processes must provide the opportunities and incentives for acts of self-definition to be recognised by government.

She illustrates her argument by comparing the respective fates of an independent voluntary sector in the two Canadian Provinces of Ontario and Quebec during the period of radical restructuring of the Canadian welfare state in the 1990s. In Ontario, the ability of voluntary organisations to offer any collective resistance to being redefined as service providers in a reduced and refocused welfare state was undermined by their inability to form effective coalitions and because of the ruthlessness of the Provincial administration. In Quebec, on the other hand, a strong grass roots associational movement that was effectively organised at Provincial level, coupled with a Provincial government with a more consensual approach enabled sufficient numbers to walk away from government-defined structures and self-identify as 'autonomous community action groups', forcing a split with social enterprises and forcing the government to negotiate with them on their own terms.

Recent research evidence from England suggests that current pressures are making it more difficult for voluntary agencies to be innovative, act collaboratively rather than in competition and avoid mission drift. But it is also apparent that many are individually being very creative in finding ways to retain their operational independence in the face of these pressures. Evidence from the housing sector, for example, shows some organisations deploying different combinations of resources such as trust, reputation, and charitable income to different sets of stakeholders to engage in market-based service delivery on behalf of government while sustaining their independent identity (Buckingham, 2012; Rees, Mullins and Bovaird, 2012). The extent to which this is possible may depend on the policy area in which organisations are involved. Evidence of the 'Work Programme', the Department for Work and Pensions welfare to work measure, is showing that how individual organisations behave is related to their position in the supply chain and there is little to differentiate voluntary providers from their private competitors (Rees et al, 2013). This sense of ducking and diving, of individual organisations having to find creative ways to preserve independent room for manoeuvre in a hostile environment dominates the English evidence. It does suggest that while the sector has been under intense pressure, the process of co-optation, instrumentalisation and incorporation varies between policy areas and is incomplete.

Nevertheless, this evidence also suggests that the single identity of the voluntary or third sector is beginning to break down around the fault line between service delivery and the collective representation of interests. The "loose and baggy monster" of voluntary action that underlies the tidy identity of a single



sector is beginning to re-emerge as different coalitions of organisations with different interests start to react differentially to the intense pressures of the current reforms to the institutions of the welfare state. The attempts of the main infrastructural organisations in England to curry favours with the Coalition government while at the same time offering defensive remarks about how the campaigning edge of organisations is not been lost in the process illustrates the pressures that are now being exerted.

The Northern Ireland context

Northern Ireland remains a post-conflict transitional society in which many of the underlying dynamics and legacies of the conflict are yet to be resolved. Relations between the two main ethno-religious communities in Northern Ireland remain wary (Devine, Kelly and Robinson 2011) and across many measures, the evidence suggests that significant risks to long-term stability remain (Nolan 2012). This underlying task of transition (variously conceived) for a long time provided a framing narrative for the voluntary and community sector's identity and the basis for its engagement with government and it continues to inform the context of these relations, although not in the way it was thought it would in the headier days of the mid 1990s.

There are two legacies to this background that continue to influence current debate on the future role of independent voluntary action as the devolved administration beds down. One is the legacy of the latter period of direct rule from the very early years of the Peace Process in 1993 where the voluntary sector achieved an extraordinary level of influence and was invited by government into a partnership to underpin the transition from conflict, latterly receiving lavish funding through the EU Peace Programmes to do this, culminating in the institutional recognition of this role in the civic forum (Williamson et al, 2000; Morison, 2001). This influence grew up in the context of very weak representative structures of government in which voluntary action came to fill what was seen as a democratic deficit.

But the failure of the Executive since 2007 to agree a cohesion and sharing strategy has deprived the sector of any context for its collective identity as a transformative agent in Northern Irish society and has left it with a second legacy issue: the paradox that the very success of this act of self-definition by the voluntary and community sector as a political force for change was achieved by being “non-political”, by-passing communal identity politics through refusing to acknowledge its continuing relevance to what the sector was and what it could do. In reality interest group representation that cuts across ethno-religious divisions has as yet never been able to overcome stronger stories of relative communal disadvantage. There is clear evidence that many voluntary agencies are embedded in the sectarian structures of Northern Ireland society in ways that closely reflect wider social processes (Acheson et al, 2008). Few organisations have found it prudent to challenge this in order to construct effective cross-community coalitions capable of creating alternative stories that would force government to deal with it on its own terms. (Acheson 2010). Too often, although for understandable reasons, organisations have taken a perverse pride in being “non-political”.

Coupled with a tradition of dependence on state funding, it is arguable that this has left the sector in Northern Ireland with a false sense of its own importance and has left it unprepared to effectively resist a government story in which transition from conflict became conflated with the task of “modernising” the structures of the welfare state through the outsourcing of public services and the embedding of market principles in the management of those services.

As the peace-making approach to partnership became emptied of policy content, something quite different has emerged in its place, revealing the compact to have been largely a process of co-optation. While the 1998 compact has been renewed as a “concordat” on very similar terms to the first document, the way partnership is conceived by the current NI Executive has in effect been redefined as much more clearly as “partnership” on the government's terms. The current Programme for Government makes this clear by

calling for partnership with both the private and voluntary sectors to underpin the social and economic advance for which government is clearly seen as having a primary responsibility (NI Executive 2011). This is achieved through spending decisions - and money talks. As one informant for this essay put it: “the Concordat is a meaningless document; the whole thing was a farce and an attempt to put a gloss on relations”.

Money talks: From peace building to public service delivery


The scale and nature of the change for those organisations that deal with government is immediately evident as soon as we look at money. In the UK as a whole, earned income to the third sector grew by 90% between 2001/2 and 2009/10 (NCVO, 2012), supplanting income from donations as the largest single source of income in 2003/4 and the trend since then has been to widen to gap between the two. While the sector now sells £6.6bn worth of goods and services directly to the public, the growth has been particularly strongly driven by income earned through delivering public services under contract to the government, which increased by 157% over the same period and in 2009/10 reached a total of almost £11bn.

Northern Ireland has followed this national trend closely. The summary trend data is set out in table one. The figures are drawn from the series of snapshot investigations carried out by NICVA in its ‘State of the Sector’ series where on each occasion a different sample was analysed and are hence the trends should be treated with caution. But nevertheless the recorded change in funding mix over the past decade has been so striking that it is likely to reflect real change on the ground.

Table One
Estimated voluntary sector income trends in Northern Ireland 2001/02 to 2010/11

	2001/02	2003/04	2006/07	2010/11
Total income (all sources)	£657m	£614m	£570m	£741.9m
Total income from government (percentage of total income)	£245m (37.3%)	£216m (35.2%)	£259m (45.4%)	£392.1 (52.8%)
Government income as contracts (NI) (percentage of total government income)	£18.89m (7.7%)	£68.34m (31.6%)	£166m (64.3%)	£266.6 (68%)
Government income as grants (NI) (percentage of total government income)	£226.11m (92.3%)	£147m (68.4%)	£92.4m (35.7%)	£125.5m (32%)

Sources: *The State of the Sector V Northern Ireland Voluntary and Community Sector Almanac*, (NICVA 2009) (from Figure 5.2, p.27), *The State of the Sector IV* (NICVA, 2005). Figures on government funding in NI prior to 2003/04 are based on estimates and no breakdown between contracts and grants is available



Income from government has been rising both in absolute terms and as a proportion of total income. By 2006/7, income from government amounted to 45% of all income, and of this 65% was in the form of contracts. Between the years 2003/04 and 2006/07 there was an almost exact swap in the proportion of government funding that came in the forms of grants and contracts. Roughly one-third contracts and two-thirds grants in 2003/04 became two-thirds contracts, one-third grants in 2006/07. The key change in the funding relationship between government and the sector thus occurred during the New Labour direct rule interregnum (Acheson, 2010).

But since then, the trend has accelerated with estimates that government now accounts for almost 53% of all income, higher than anywhere else in the UK, 68% of which was in the form of contracts (NICVA, 2012). This is much higher than the average in England, Scotland and Wales, where closer to a third of income comes from government. But the figures suggest more. Between 2006/07 and 2010/11:

- Total income increased by £172.9m (30% increase)
- Total income from government increased by £133.1m (51% increase)
- The increase in contract income accounted for £100m of the 133m (60% increase);

In other words while all income has gone up, income from government contracts as a proportion of all government income has gone up at twice the speed of overall income. The change over the past four years has thus become more intense as the slight increase in the proportion of government funds in the form of contracts from 64.3% in 2007/07 to 68% in 2010/11 masks the fact that latter figure is a higher proportion of a significantly higher sum.

These figures show that relations between the voluntary and community sector and government in Northern Ireland are undergoing radical change, underpinned by a large-scale out-sourcing of public services to providers within both the voluntary and private sectors, and accompanied by a switch from grant in aid to commissioning through procurement.

Because of the substantial jump in government funding of the sector since 2006/07, overall cuts in public expenditure have had less of an immediate impact than they have had in England, especially, where there has been a 30% reduction of local authority budgets. But they are having an impact nevertheless. Over the spending review period to 2015, the Northern Ireland budget is set to reduce by around 8% in line with public expenditure reductions across the UK as a whole; in some areas of policy, budgets have been frozen for up to five years and in others annual uplifts are well short of the rate of inflation, creating significant cost pressures. In addition, expenditure on social security, which does not form part of the Northern Ireland budget, is expected to decline by around £1bn by 2017. In order to protect the health budget (growing at 2% a year) other departments are facing cuts of between 2.1% (Education) to 11.6% (Regional Development).

But budgetary restrictions are having a further impact in encouraging the move away from a model of funding, whether grant in aid or contracts for delivery of specified services, that was based on identifying the strengths of specific voluntary organisations as being right for the job that needs doing, so-called “intelligent commissioning”, to a process of commissioning services from any willing provider through public procurement. This is currently changing rapidly after a slow start, with the major policy areas where voluntary agencies play a big role such as homelessness services and social care in particular in the process of switching to a procurement model in the incoming financial year. Combined with an increasing readiness by government ministers to act unilaterally without consultation to force funding bids from consortia of organisations in an effort to secure efficiency savings, using a prime contractor supply chain model, the changes are currently being felt as extremely destabilising.



Evidence of threats to the independence of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Sector

The rapidly increasing pace of change is reflected in emerging evidence on the extent to which individual organisations are starting to struggle and, more worryingly the degree to which the Northern Ireland administration is turning away from viewing voluntary organisations as bringing anything of value to the quality of public life over and beyond delivering public services to a pre-determined script.


There is some evidence to suggest that up until recently, debate about independence in Northern Ireland has been more muted than in England in particular. In a review essay published in 2009, this author noted that what research evidence there was tended to reflect a degree of complacency. Organisations welcomed the additional transparency that contracting gave to relationships with funders and very few felt that mission drift was a significant issue (Acheson 2009). This evidence goes back to the period of the direct rule between 2002 and 2007, but while more recent evidence from after the reinstatement of the local administration suggests that there was some growing concern over the funding situation, there remained a degree of guarded optimism as recently as 2010 (NICVA, 2010).

More recent evidence drawn from a study of housing partnerships and the 'Supporting People' programme, and the five key informant interviews conducted for this research reveals the rapidly destabilising impact of current changes. The evidence points to a number of key pressure points or themes:

- The switch to building relationships on the basis of public procurement models from a trust-based partnership model;
- The need to drive down costs is making collaboration harder and forcing organisations to become much more competitive;
- An ideological turn in some government departments towards a much narrower and more instrumental view of the role of voluntary organisations in public policy, driven in part by the role of political advisors and in part by what one informant identified as the ideological preferences of civil servants.
- An atmosphere of fear and timidity among organisations coupled with a lack of capacity in the sector as a whole to develop new stories on what voluntary action is for.

Informants varied in their views on the nature of the ideological turn in government. In part it was seen as a question of civil servants seemingly feeling free to express their own ideological preferences in meetings in the knowledge that they would not be contradicted by their Minister; another informant thought the problem was more a matter of an unwillingness to make judgements based on evidence, a lack of capacity and competence in the civil service. One informant linked this problem with the switch to the use of procurement rather than grants as the main method of funding voluntary agencies by government. Not understanding the overall purpose of supporting the voluntary sector, it was just easier to use public procurement, with the added advantage of making it easier to defend decisions

But more broadly there was also recognition that there was a lack of maturity in the Northern Ireland Assembly which was still learning to address social policy issues and was unsure of the role and function of the third sector. This reflects an observed disconnection between the conduct of politics at the Assembly and the nature and scope of felt social problems on the ground (Nolan, 2013). It had not stopped some organisations, particularly those with access to resources from outside Northern Ireland, working the Assembly system on specific issues. Nor had it stopped individual MLAs relying on voluntary organisations for advice. But there were a variety of views on the willingness and extent of engagement on major policy issues. For example, one informant took the view that the recent debate on the impact of welfare reform in



Northern Ireland was driven by voluntary sector intervention, while another remained more sceptical, taking the view that much more could have been achieved.

The combination of tightening budgets and the preference for procurement-based funding is having a number of identifiable consequences. Greater competition is reducing trust among voluntary agencies with smaller organisations in particular becoming wary of bigger ones with more resources able to compete for bigger contracts. “There is a sense of domination by bigger organisations”. Larger organisations start to look like an arm of government responsible for managing performance by lower tier organisations. This was becoming an increasing issue for some caught up in a supply chain funding model. Being accountable to other voluntary organisations for performance was fundamentally changing relations within the sector.


At the same time, funders were insisting on collaborative arrangements that might not suit the organisations being told to collaborate. Organisations found themselves doing things that they might not have otherwise chosen to do. Mission drift becomes an increasing problem as organisations “find themselves jumping to the government’s fiddle more and more”. This is a creeping process, often taken in very small steps each of which at the time felt like the right thing to do. One informant said: “We didn’t plan it; it just happened. But if you don’t grasp opportunities you are lost”. There was a strong sense that as alternative sources of funding become harder to get, organisations were being left with few choices if they were to survive. This organisation was now proposing to review its mission in the light of what it had found itself doing.

Mission drift is compounded by a creeping business orientation as organisations lose the ability to be more creative and innovative, having to work to narrow contract specifications over which they have very little control. Tenders were being increasingly tightly specified with very little pre-engagement with organisations likely to deliver those contracts. This was not simply a problem of being subject to external regulation. The real problem according to another informant was being subject to regulations that were set without reference to organisations’ knowledge and skills. In her view organisations found themselves being “micro-managed” by funders who are not professionals in the area and in ways that are often inappropriate and insufficiently sensitive to the needs of the client group being served. “Independence is becoming more and more eroded, with imposed activities that may not fit with organisation values, whose very structures are being dictated by people outside the sector”.

This evidence suggests that the processes of instrumentalisation and incorporation are well-advanced in Northern Ireland. The rapidly changing funding environment driven by an administration preference for a combination of out-sourcing public services while exercising maximum control over costs and targets, coupled with the lack of alternative sources of funding is creating huge pressures. In this environment organisations are finding it very difficult to collaborate over wider social goals and create alternative stories over the value of independent voluntary action to the public at large or to MLAs.

But the evidence also points to another more deeply rooted issue that affects the capacity of voluntary agencies to do this. A legacy issue that has roots in a past history of government reliance on the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, what one informant called the “ego of the sector”, was accompanied by what he felt was complacency and a sense of entitlement. This left organisations finding it hard to think strategically and particularly vulnerable to pressure from government to behave in ways better suited in the radically different contemporary environment, leading to caution in the face of fear of financial pressures.

In addition, informants identified timidity among organisations in the face of the nature of communal politics. There was a fear of politicians and what they could do to organisations. This was a particular issue at local level where representatives of political parties were seen as well-integrated into local organisations and very controlling, creating a back-channel to politicians at regional level which organisations had very little control over. There was recognition that the communally based political parties in control of the Northern



Ireland Executive had an interest in keeping local voluntary action in line with communal definitions of social problems. This background reinforced fear and anxiety about being seen to speak out of turn.

This freeze effect on the willingness of organizations to speak up, risked a situation where the “Assembly grows up thinking there shouldn’t be any voice from civil society”. A weak and dependent sector, in this view would simply allow sectional and powerful interests to influence legislation in their own interests and not necessarily in the interest of the wider society.

Finding a new story to tell:

The evidence suggests that the Northern Ireland community and voluntary sector is going down a familiar path in cost-cutting neo-liberal welfare systems and faces familiar challenges. There is nothing peculiar or unusual about this. Northern Ireland shares a profound shift from understanding voluntary agencies in terms of who they are and represent, to looking at what they can do. It is marked by:


- Co-optation to neo-liberal economic and social reform through the illusion of consensus provided by mechanisms like the concordat
- Instrumentalisation of relations with government through public procurement and the absence of other funding routes
- Incorporation into public service programmes

None of these processes is complete. Our evidence from the study of supported housing, for example, turned up instances of clever and creative footwork among some of those voluntary agencies involved, reflecting the evidence from England. But strategies based on organisational survival miss the point about independence; they may be necessary but they are not a sufficient response to the challenge.

This challenge is quite daunting, not just because of the apparent irresistibility of the current flow of change, but because of the linked issues of an inhospitable political context and a weakened and more divided voluntary and community sector, itself a consequence of that change. International evidence shows that the collective acts of naming and framing “who we are and what we are here to do” that constitute the assertion of independent values in society require the necessary collective capacity among voluntary and community organisations and access to a shared story that resonates more widely with the public. But they also require a political context in which such a collective representation of interests achieves a degree of recognition. In Northern Ireland this has never been easy because of the communal nature of politics here.

But opportunities are opening up. Emerging evidence, most recently in the second Peace Monitoring Report, published by the Community Relations Council (Nolan, 2013) suggests that Northern Ireland is becoming a very different place than that imagined by communal politics. Big ticket economic and social issues like the poor skills base, an ageing population, and energy security together with changing social attitudes to issues like national identity, offer possible agendas for renewing coalitions that cross other communal fault lines and points at which to engage with the Assembly.

In short there is a new story that could be told about the collective independent contribution of a re-energised voluntary and community sector. The evidence may appear bleak, but there are nevertheless possibilities for change. But it needs resourcing and leadership and a refocusing of energies on more than survival strategies for individual organisations. In short there is a need to try and move discussion beyond questions of survival. To start a discussion of how this might happen, three possible directions are offered here.

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1. Creating space for debate. At its most ambitious there might be merit in re-running a process similar to that conducted almost 15 years ago with NICVA's 'Millenium debate', or the discussions within Northern Ireland as part of the 2006 – 2010 Carnegie Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in Britain and Ireland;
 2. A key issue revealed in the evidence is a loss of control over the kinds of collaborations organisations are free to enter, excluding arrangements that do not meet immediate government funders' objectives. There is an urgent need for support that will enable collaboration and coalition-building to frame shared visions and counter tendencies towards competition;
 3. There is a need to find a way of resourcing the engagement of small-scale local voluntary action in coalitions of interest that stretch upwards to debate at regional level as well as sideways to grassroots initiatives in other communities. Strong ties of these kinds are an essential component of resistance capacity. There is a history to draw on here, but it is in urgent need of revitalisation.

None of this will be easy in the current climate and it will require independent funders to commit resources to enable it to happen. Could it happen? Certainly, at least with a small-scale start. Should it happen? Only those with a direct interest in the issues can decide, but they should bear in mind the risks of shying at the fence.



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